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ABSTRACT

This speech focuses on the protection of institutional autonomy in higher education. The speaker opens by offering some of his own basic beliefs. The balance of the paper considers three key issues central to institutional autonomy. The first issue involves specific threats to autonomy: the socio-cultural mistrust of authority and institutions, the external control of most funding, and the rise of special interests groups within the university. The second issue focuses on how to find the right balance and establish principles or limits for determining how far the institution is prepared to go in sharing decision-making power before essential autonomy is lost. The final issue involves the causes of fear of encroachment including the danger of losing identity through losing autonomy, the awareness of the complexity and difficulty of responding to the threat, and finally a lack of confidence in decision-making abilities in key areas which must be the province of the institution itself. The paper concludes by arguing that the essential protection from damage through interference by others is to achieve internal consensus on values and priorities that is sufficiently precise to serve as a guide for concrete decision making. (JB)

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THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWING OURSELVES

by

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Presented at the Association of Atlantic Universities Council's Special Session on "Autonomy and the Changing World"

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THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWING OURSELVES

I very much appreciate your invitation to be the token outsider on this panel. I don't feel a complete stranger here because, although I grew up and have lived most of my life in Western Canada, my father (who served as President of the University of Victoria) was a native of Truro. And I love coming to Halifax, which has improved so remarkably since the mid-fifties when I first spent several months here with the Navy. So I thank you for asking me back.

The disadvantage of being the last speaker on a panel is that your colleagues have already said everything that is worth saying on the subject concerned, especially if there has been an opportunity for elaboration and reaction during an intervening refreshment break. The advantage is that this frees you to say whatever you would really like to say, no matter how remote it may be from the subject at hand. So while I will try to talk about some aspects of autonomy, I'll do it from a very subjective perspective based on my own personal experience as a university administrator in three provinces over the past quarter-century, the last half of which has been as President of two very different universities.

Let me begin by outlining half-a-dozen basic beliefs that I hold dearly, so that you will have some idea of where I'm

coming from and a brief indicator of where I'll be going in this presentation. I believe that:

1) autonomy (i.e., our ability to govern ourselves) is essential to the academic freedom we require in order to do our job, and hence it largely defines our identity as universities;

2) Canadian universities have traditionally been accorded a high level of autonomy compared to those in most other countries, and we must not be the architects of our own destruction by opposing reasonable demands for accountability on the basis of vague, unsubstantiated, and dubitable rallying cries alone;

3) as publicly funded institutions, we have an obligation to ensure that the public benefits from how we spend the resources that it provides;

4) the public has a right to participate in determining what benefits it may reasonably expect to derive from its investment in our universities;

5) universities have a duty to be accountable to the public by generating information on their success in

producing the benefits they are legitimately expected to produce, by making that information publicly available, and by demonstrating to the public their use of that information in improving their performance; and

6) such accountability can lead to an increase in autonomy through the trust and confidence it generates rather than to a decrease in autonomy through external intervention, and if that accountability is exercised in a constructive and genuine way it can result in progress toward the achievement of a university's goals.

So I am an inveterate advocate of both autonomy and accountability and I firmly believe that they can be mutually enhancing, for the betterment of our institutions, as long as they are pursued on the basis of hope rather than fear, from a sense of security rather than doubt. I shall argue that the key to achieving this is knowing ourselves.

With that framework of beliefs as background, and at the risk of repeating some of what my predecessors on this platform have already said, let me turn now to the consideration of three key questions that I ~~consider~~ view as central to the topic of this afternoon's session. They have to do with the increasing

threats to our autonomy, ways of responding to these threats, and causes of our fear of encroachment.

What Are the Threats to Our Autonomy?

The reason for our concern, for the very fact that this discussion is being held today, is that we sense a powerful convergence of trends that clearly threaten our continued enjoyment of the autonomy we consider essential to our identity as universities. These trends may be seen as falling into three broad categories - socio-cultural, financial, and internal - so let me provide a light sketch of each.

For several years now there has been a general and growing mistrust of authority and institutions in our socio-cultural setting. The traditional family has lost salience for a variety of reasons, the church has declined drastically in its influence, and governments have been reviled and rejected throughout the world. The university, as a major socio-cultural institution, has not been immune from this phenomenon. In fact, it has been exacerbated in our case by what Arnold Naimark calls the "new economic realities" in his recent discussion paper for AUCC on "Performance Indicators". The combination of declining public resources and increasing public demands for what

universities are supposed to be doing has accelerated the questioning of whether we are doing what we are supposed to be doing and whether it is being done as well as it should be. So we see the emergence of public calls for quality assurance and comprehensive auditing, of rankings and indicators, and of government reviews of universities in more than half our provinces (in Ontario alone, there are currently major investigations underway in the areas of training, restructuring, governance, accountability, ancillary fees regulation, and undergraduate program appraisal - all six simultaneously and virtually tripping over one another). In a milieu like that, it's no wonder that we feel our autonomy is threatened.

A second, and somewhat related, form of threat derives from the fact that the strings of our major purses are controlled externally. Operating and capital grants, several sources of research funds, and tuition fees in many provinces are all controlled by governments. And governments inevitably have social, economic, and cultural agendas that they must pursue. In their declining fiscal circumstances, it is realistic to expect that governments will seek greater control over the allocation of scarce resources to agencies which are in a position to make or break the pursuit of their agendas. The university is a principal player among such agencies, and so again it is little

wonder that we are sensing an increasing threat to our autonomy because of the trend toward targetting of government grants. And our other external sources of revenue - industries and councils that fund research, and private-sector organizations and individuals that make donations - are steering our expenditure of their contributions much more closely now than in the past as well.

Thirdly, there are internal factors at work that place our ability to manage ourselves, and hence our autonomy, in jeopardy. Among these are an increasingly active array of special interests, most of them highly legitimate but also somewhat disruptive of our focus on academic productivity. These interests are largely equity-based and they include demands for disability accommodation, curricular reform, safety, and freedom from harassment, discrimination and all kinds of abuse (including verbal). Important as it is for us to address these concerns directly and positively, we must be careful to avoid their down-sides (such as "political correctness" when it reaches the point of conflict with essential academic freedom). Another internal complicator of our capacity for self-determination, also not without legitimacy, arises from demands for a stronger role in university governance by a variety of what are now called "stakeholder groups" - particularly our employee unions. In Ontario these demands are being actively encouraged by the

provincial government, and at the national level they are reflected most dramatically in the recent CAUT report by its so-called "Independent Study Group on University Governance". On the face of it, stronger participation in university governance by internal "stakeholder groups" should enhance our autonomy by adding to the seats at the table of self-determination. However, there can be serious conflicts between the interests of employee unions and those of institutional management, or among employee groups and between them and student groups, and to the extent that such conflicts are seen to weaken the university's recognized structure for accountability to the public through its governing board and the provincial legislature, one can anticipate government initiatives to reduce our autonomy. And finally, our own interests in promoting student mobility will also lead inevitably to a reduction in the autonomy of individual institutions since it will require much more "automatic" recognition of credit among universities, between colleges and universities, and for prior experience - at the provincial, national, and international levels. Again, while such a development is not necessarily bad (in fact, in the case of student mobility I believe it is long overdue) it must be added to the list of internal factors that are currently threatening our autonomy.

How Can We Respond to These Threats?

In seeking a response to these threats, we face an interesting challenge of finding the right balance. If we over-accommodate the external threats to our autonomy we lose our ability to determine the fundamental directions of our institutions, and if we under-accommodate the external threats we lose the financial resources necessary to pursue any directions. If we over-accommodate the internal threats to our autonomy we lose the public's confidence that there is a workable accountability structure in place so our governmental masters are likely to "move in", but if we under-accommodate the internal threats we'll lose necessary support from our own constituencies which won't accept the authority of our accountability structure - and so again, it won't work and the public will lose confidence in our ability to govern ourselves and the province will likely be forced to "move in" once more. So we must respond with great care; but respond we must.

In determining what our response should be, it is essential that we establish some principles to guide us - to define some reasonable limits which determine how far we are prepared to go in sharing decision-making power before we reach the point at which the essential autonomy we need is lost. Defining such limits is a very difficult and delicate task, and

I'm not even going to attempt it here. Let me simply suggest some personal predilections, with reference just to the external threats, for illustrative purposes.

I would propose that there are three areas of decision making in which agencies external to the university should have no authority (although they can and often should be consulted in making these determinations):

1) such fundamental academic matters as what we teach and study, who is admitted or employed to teach and study, how the teaching and studying are done, how success is defined and measured and rewarded, how we organize ourselves to do our work, and how our resources are allocated (including the establishment of budgets, the assignment of personnel, and the use of facilities);

2) our approach to making decisions - the participants, procedures, and principles to be involved in the process (a limit which the Ontario government has crossed dramatically this past year); and

3) the choice of values and priorities that we apply in making our decisions.

I do not believe that we are obliged to share with external agents our decision-making authority in any of these three fundamental domains and we have every right and reason to fight against intervention in them, although we can legitimately be expected to produce evidence that we have developed and are applying internal means to assure effectiveness and efficiency in the decisions that we do make about them.

Beyond these proprietary areas, we should not fear some participation by partners from elsewhere, who have a legitimate interest and the requisite expertise, in helping us determine what to do and in doing it with us. In fact, we should welcome such involvement because it will not only stave off external threats to our autonomy but it will also help us do things better - and probably enjoy them more. The growing press for accountability should be viewed, then, not as a threat to diminish our autonomy but rather as an opportunity that can be exploited and managed to enhance our autonomy - as long as it is contained within limits such as I have suggested.

What Causes Our Fear of Encroachment?

If threats to our autonomy can be effectively responded to through defining limits to incursion that are understood and

respected by others, why do we continue to fear encroachment? I think there are three reasons that are immediately apparent. One is our knowledge that if we lose our autonomy we lose our identity; that's a simple fact, and there's nothing we can do about it - nor would we want to - but it is nevertheless a frightening reality. The second reason for our fear of encroachment inheres in our awareness that the threats exist, that they are significant and complex, and that it is difficult to find responses which will eliminate or reduce them; uncomfortable as this awareness is because of the fear it generates, we should not seek to eliminate it but rather we should foster it because without an awareness of the threats and their complications we simply cannot confront and respond to them. The third cause for our fear of encroachment is our lack of confidence in our own decision making in those areas which I said earlier we must reserve to ourselves. This concern we can do something about - indeed we must, because it is our best (perhaps our only) handle on the problem.

Let me elaborate on this last point a bit before concluding. A few minutes ago I mentioned three areas of university decision making in which we should reserve all authority to ourselves. The first had to do with fundamental academic matters, and I believe that most of us are fully confident in our ability to make such decisions. The second had

to do with deciding how we shall make our decisions and, while many of us would welcome some outside advice on that from time to time, I believe we are reasonably confident that we can muddle through on our own as we experiment with various decision-making processes. The third area had to do with determining the values and priorities that we'll apply in making our decisions, and it is here that I think we may lack certainty in our capacity to exercise autonomy successfully, and hence, we experience some fear of encroachment.

How can we improve our confidence in our ability to make our own decisions - to the point where we know what we stand for, what we should do, how far we can be pushed, what the reasonable limits to autonomy are so that having established those limits we can relax in the security of knowing ourselves and not worry about others destroying our identity? If we know who we are and what we stand for, then we can define the limits of autonomy that will protect that identity. And if we are confident about our limits then we can relax in our understanding of what must be protected from intrusion. We can then welcome the participation of others in our work up to the point established by those limits.

So the key challenge that I think we face, in protecting ourselves from damage through interference by others,

is to reach clarity in defining ourselves - to achieve internal consensus on our values and priorities, not as hollow slogans or vague mission statements, but rather in sufficiently precise terms that they can serve as guides for concrete decision making. This is an extremely complicated and time-consuming task, and there is an undeniable temptation to set it aside while grappling with more immediate crises. However, it is a task that must be done, periodically by each university according to its own idiosyncratic conditions, if we are to have the confidence in our ability to govern ourselves that is necessary to the protection of our essential autonomy in the face of today's demands. And ironically, I think one of our best routes to confidence in the self-definition that we establish is through involving outsiders in helping us to achieve that definition. We must decide; but their input can help us to do so.

Putting it more simply, let's invite qualified outsiders to help us clarify the standards and values by which we'll define the limits beyond which we won't permit external encroachment in our decision making. I submit that, to the degree that such outsiders feel they have contributed to our setting of such limits to their encroachment, they will be inclined to respect those limits and thus accord us the autonomy we require.

Conclusion

I finish, then, with the old adage: "Know thyself". If we know ourselves, it is more likely that others will know us. And if they have helped us to determine who we are, they are more likely to ~~respect~~ understand our need to protect that identity - and to retain the autonomy which it requires.

Let's do our homework internally, with whatever help we may get, so that we can "lighten up" externally.

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